AN IMAGINARY DIA- LOGUE: A COMPARA- TIVE LOOK AT CON- TEMPORARY THAI AND WESTERN POETRY¹

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I do not wish to sound pessimistic, but it is time that the image of Thailand as a land of smiles should be questioned. In this respect, contemporary Thai poetry can substantiate my point that contemporary Thai society is extremely complex and defies any simplification. As we are meeting at Sanam Chandra Palace in Nakorn Pathom, it is only appropriate that I begin with a poem by Saksiri Meesomsueb (born 1956) "Retracing Footprints on the Path", which was the very first poem read at a poetry reading session on 14 March 1997, at Tabkhwon House, only a few steps away from our meeting place today. The poem is quoted here in full in a translation by Chamnongsri Hanchanelak.

"Paper birds panicked into flight
Reeling in vast tear-filled skies
Boom, Boom.....scattered in
fright
Bang Bang...*ee-poh* guns
broke the air
Shot out *chamaliang* bullets
Bright-eyed ones dropped
drooped
Eye-balls burst - broke and bled

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Blood dripped dropped like
prized gems
Smooth flesh breached
By powered thrust of iron
blades
Screams reverberated through
the land
but valued no more than fruit-
flies' buzz
Back and forth, back and forth
Tears flooded the clouds
Little rabbit's up to its neck in
despair
Grabbed heaven-spire, pulled
hope crashing down
Rainbow ghost lunged his
lightening rod
Ripping through the startled
chest
Rainbow ghost sucked dry the
blood
The sky moans mixed with
fierce gun-fires
Was it this tamarind tree or some
other?
Sobbing Pigtail, Topknot and
Glae queried
Was it on this branch or another,
pretty tree,
That they hung the beloved
maid?
Breezes blew, branch bent,
body swung
Beaten, battered, kicked as it
hung
No words, no cries, no
recrimination
Was the rope so tight that
you're silent?
Your eyes bulged, tongue hung
out
Is it rage that clenched your fist
so?
Let anger dissolve with the
dissolving breath
For your corpse they've
cremated with burning tires

They cupped hands to make
 megaphones
 For trumpeting news they'd
 concocted
 That we were a fungal and
 leprous lot
 With spotted hinds and scarlet
 heads
 Then they threw olive grenades
 Ten thousand *ee-poh* guns
 responded
 Spattering *Chamaliang* bullets
 Smashing lives, scattering
 bodies
 None died but revived by magic
wah
 The dead were quickened with
 life
 Not killed, not dead, we're alive
 the wounded cured, the dead
 revived
 Not killed, we're still here to
 stand fast
 Hope and dreams are beacon-
 bright
 We select, analyze and put
 away
 Keep this, discard that to find
 the win-way
 You on your side, we on ours
 Differing yet steadfast...with
 Truth
 Lets' cross the peaks of
 ignorance
 To reach victory through
 wisdom of mankind
 Like fire is the vengeful heart
 Let die the hatred of days past
 "Foes to be fought is the abasing
 Delusion
 That inhabits the human mind"
 Come...keep banana guns
 against the wall
 And hone our wits for the vital
 war
 Make it sharp of edge and great

of depth
 Set tactics for strategic of peace
 Sixth October 2519
 Retracing footprints on the path
 Subtracting a finger or a toe for
 each year
 None's left on my hands and
 feet, dear friends
 Counting fingers and toes that
 day to this
 It's been twenty years, dear
 friends
 Counting fingers and toes that
 day to this
 It's been twenty years, dear
 friends"³

As you may have experienced from the video presentation, the response to the reading by the poet was overwhelming. Saksiri Meesomsueb and 15 other poets responded to an invitation by a research group engaged in a comparative research project entitled "Poetry as an Intellectual and Spiritual Force in Contemporary Society: Experiences from Thai, British-Irish, American, French and German Literatures". The poets interacted with the researchers on a number of issues related to the cultural environment that had induced them to become poets. After the morning and afternoon seminar sessions, the poets gathered again at Tabkhwan House for a reading session, each presenting one poem of his or her own which was expected to lend strength to the researchers' idealistic proposition that poetry is an intellectual and spiritual force in contemporary Thai society. It was no coincidence that "Retracing Footprints on the Path" should have

³ A video recording of the reading session is available from the German Department, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, Nakorn Pathom.

served as an overture to an altogether spiritually and intellectually enriching evening.

The poem might appear to be a departure from the traditional notion of Thailand as a pleasure-loving country. The old myth about its pristine innocence can no longer be sustained. The political events of 1973, 1976 and 1992 more than demonstrated that a brotherly conflict in this Far Eastern land could at any time degenerate into a fratricide. If the Establishment, including our own educational authorities, continues to endorse the traditional image of the land of smiles (our history textbooks deliberately turning a blind eye to the atrocious events), our literature, and especially our contemporary poetry, refuses to enter into a complicity against the Thai people and valiantly accepts the responsibility of being the guiding light in search of truth. (The Ministry of Education recently, under pressure, decided to take up accounts of the bloody events into the new official history book, soon to be published. One of the chief authors is none other than our poet Naowarat Phongphaiboon, who has written heart-rending poems on the events, but invited for the [wrong] reason that he was there on the scene!)

It goes without saying that the poem by Saksiri Meesomsueb should be able to touch a responsive chord in the Thai public, but could it be expected that our

friends from other countries would be in a position to react likewise? I have had experience of presenting Saksiri's poem to foreign audiences, and the responses were to be encouraging.⁴ It seems the poem contains a message which is supranational and in keeping with the times. In other words, it can enter into a *dialogue* with foreign counterparts. In order to establish a basis for such an exchange, it might be a good idea to explore contemporary Western aesthetic thinking which might help to show certain affinities with contemporary Thai poetry. I shall quote a few lines from "Discourse on the Poem" by the German poet, Christoph Meckel:

The poem is not the place,
where beauty is nurtured...
The poem is not the place,
where truth is adorned...
The poem is not the place,
where pain is healed...
The poem is not the place,
where dying is appeased,
where hunger is satisfied,
where hope is exalted.
The poem is the place for
mortally wounded truth.⁵

⁵ Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo die Schönheit gepflegt wird. [...]

Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo die Wahrheit verziert wird. [...]

Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo der Schmerz verheilt wird. [...]

Das Gedicht ist nicht der Ort, wo das Sterben begütigt, wo der Hunger gestillt, wo die Hoffnung verklärt wird.

Das Gedicht ist der Ort der zu Tode verwundeten Wahrheit.

Christoph Meckel : *Hundert Gedichte*. Ausgewählt von Harald Weinrich, München : Hanser 1988, S.67, V.1,5,9,14-16. (My translation)

⁴ I wish to refer to lectures given at the following institutions: 13 August 1998 at the Siam Society, Bangkok (in English), 17 May 1999 at Leeds University (in English), 18 May 1999 at Manchester University (in English), 7 June 1999 at the Zentrum für Literaturforschung, Berlin (in German) and 17 December 2001 at Hongkong Baptist University.

We could almost reach the conclusion that Saksiri's "Retracing Footprints on the Path" has been written with Meckel's poetological programme in mind! The crux of the matter is what Meckel calls that "mortally wounded truth" which the poet does not hesitate to hurl into the face of his compatriots. The description of the event in stark naturalistic details probably goes beyond Meckel's poetological demand, but somehow does not lapse into an emotional paroxysm, for the poet knows how to steer the middle course and to contain the *physical cruelty* with an interplay between the real bloodbath and children's war games. The physical cruelty in the end is transformed into a *philosophical cruelty*⁶ which also can be explained in terms of Buddhism. The poet does not plead for *forgetting* but for *forgiving*, not in the legal sense of an amnesty which every military *junta* in Thailand declared after a *coup d'état* in order to exculpate the murderers as well as the murdered, but in a *Buddhist* sense. (In Thai we distinguish between "Aphaiyathan" [forgiving] from "Aphaiyathot" [amnesty])

What Saksiri is trying to present in his poem is a process of internalization of the historical event through *dharma*. This reminds me of a remark by Seamus Heaney on his departed friend, Ted Hughes: "...he [Ted Hughes] internalized the historical crises of the British nation [...] and transformed [them] into a healer's vision."⁷ It seems as though Saksiri's poem was written in

the spirit of Heaney's characterization of his friend. An *imaginary dialogue* has thus taken place between a Thai poet and his British colleague. We Thai should consider ourselves fortunate in that our contemporary poetry has attained what Thai society at large has not achieved, or rather lacked the will to achieve, namely, to come up with a "healer's vision" and thereby forge a new beginning (as embodied in the *finale* of the poem) or a regeneration.

On the concept of "regeneration" in contemporary literature, literary scholars cannot but admire the moral courage and the spiritual force shown by contemporary literature, however dark or dismal the image presented may be. The British germanist Ronald Peacock has very well characterized this trend.

For the moderns [...] the aesthetic acceptance of the terrifying but honest image of the dark aspects of life and humanity, presented as suffering and helplessness without compensating consolations, rests on the prior belief that one should in conscience pursue the truth, whatever it is, and whatever it shows. This gives back to literature [...] a functional role and importance, because there is implied in the whole situation the idea of *regeneration*; both individual and society are to be redeemed by the instrument of truth.⁸

Although we Thai did not experience the last world war in the same measure

⁶ The term "philosophical cruelty" is borrowed from Jan Kott's book : *Shakespeare notre contemporain*, Paris 1962, p. 118.

⁷ *The Observer*, 16 May 1999 (The Week, p. 4)

⁸ 1972. p. 34.

as our European counterparts, yet it is still possible for us to enter into a dialogue with them, as our own tendency towards immolating our own brethren has some common elements with the European carnage. We should be grateful to our contemporary poets that they have the courage to confront all kinds of "historical crises", try to internalize and at the same time to surmount them. In this sense the French poet Daniel Biga never hesitates to give a clear answer: self-knowledge and knowledge of the world are prime conditions that must go hand in hand. The poem "Look" (Regarde) is a plaidoyer for an open worldview (in a literal sense).

Look

Look at love clouds
Look at the daily sun
Look into yourself
Look feel listen taste touch
Breathe laugh cry sing dance
run love
I have made my most beautiful
journeys in your arms
You are free
You are alive
With your suffering and
your joy
Your are an immense look⁹

⁹ Regarde l'amour les nuages
regarde le soleil quotidien
regarde à l'intérieur de toi
regarde sens écoute goûte touche
respire ris pleure chante danse cours
aime
(j'ai fait mes plus beaux voyages entre
tes bras)

Tu es libre
Tu es vivant
Avec ta souffrance et ta joie
Tu es un immense regard

Daniel Biga: *Né nu, suivi de Oiseaux Monican et de Kilroy was here*, Paris: Le Chereche Midi: 1984 (Coll. Points Fixes), p.69. (My translation)

The penultimate line quoted sounds like an echo from the well-known poem "Prometheus" by Goethe in which the prime conditions of man are described ("Here I sit, shape man/ in my own image,/ A race, that like me shall/ Suffer, weep,/ Be happy and rejoice...")¹⁰ Furthermore, the inner and the outer worlds constitute here a unity, under the condition that one is open to all facets of human experience. Joy and suffering lie at the root of human existence which one must accept. From Goethe to Biga a transformation may have taken place. Whereas Goethe's protagonist has to fight for this prime condition, it has already become a normality in Biga's poem. Such an acceptance of the world and of the human condition as they really are represents a philosophical position common in contemporary poetry. The dean of contemporary Thai poets, Angkarn Kalayanaphong, elevates this worldview to a metaphysical height. He makes his point very clear in the poem "World".

The world is not dependent
solely on valuable gems.
Sand and other things have
partaken of its creation.
All lowly elements have done
well in providing equilibrium
So that the universe will not
be devoid of any constituent
part.
This earth is not an abode
reserved for golden swans.
Crows have also their rightful
place.

¹⁰ My translation. The original German is as follows:

"Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde,
Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich, sei,
Zu leiden, zu weinen,

Those revelling in their own
exclusiveness are mere
idiots.

If there is no friendship, the
world will be robbed of all
happiness.¹¹

How can we maintain such a precarious
equilibrium in the face of the multifarious
crises that beset our contemporary
world? Another French poet has an
answer to offer, namely, to lodge man
in nature. In the poem entitled "On the
Great Apposition of the World" (*O la
grande apposition du monde*), Michel
Deguy demonstrates how the natural
sphere and the human sphere can merge
harmoniously.

A field
of roses near a field of corn and
two red children
in the field near the field of
roses
and a field of maize near the
field of corn
and two old willows at the point
of convergence;
the singing of two rose-coloured
children in the
field of corn near the field of
roses and two old
willows that watch over the
roses the corn the red
children and the maize...¹²

¹¹ Angkarn Kalayanaphong: *Poems*,
Bangkok: Siam Press 1999 (6. Aufl.) (Original:
Thai; my translation)

¹² un champ
de roses près d'un champ de blé et deux
enfants
rouges dans le champ voisin du champ de
roses
et un champ du maïs près du champ de blé
et deux
saules vieux à la jointure; le chant de deux
enfants

That two *red* children have transformed
themselves into two *rose-coloured*
children speaks for the power of nature.
Another leading Thai poet Chang Sae
Tang looks at this relationship between
man and nature from another
perspective. His approach to nature
might qualify as anthropocentric.

When mother feeds her child
with sweets
The fruits on the tree become
sweet.
The sun shines on the tree
The branches sway in the wind.
Mother and child in mother's
arms
While away their time under the
tree.¹³

Where will this East-West dialogue lead
to? Have the Orientals led their
Occidental colleagues so far from
Christop Meckel's position that the latter
are now ready to assume the role of
healers and no longer take the poem as
the place for "mortally wounded truth".
There is no doubt that our poets are well
aware that the twentieth-century man
finds himself at the edge of the abyss
which could devour him at any time.
That they are ready and willing to
counter such tragic possibility with their
professed faith in life is a testimony to
their creative force. The "historical
crises" which Seamus Heaney
mentioned offer our contemporary poets

roses dans le champ de blé près du champ
de roses
et deux vieux saules qui veillent les roses
le blé les
enfants rouges et le maïs...

Miche Deguy: *Poèmes 1960-1970*, Paris:
Gallimard 1973, pp. 17-18.

¹³ Chang Sae Tang: "Mother and Child", in:
Analysis and Anthology of Thai Poetry, p.
130. (My translation)

a unique opportunity to transform their "years abroad" into spiritual experiences. In this respect the American poet Denise Levertov has shown in her poem "In Thai Binh [Peace] Province" that poetry as an internalization of experience can transcend all painful memories.

[...] I've used up all my film on
bombed hospitals, [...] and for the moments all my
tears too are used up [...] So I'll use my burning eyes to
photograph within me [...] [...] Peace within the long war.
It is that life, unhurried, sure,
persistent, I must bring home
when I try to bring the war
home.¹⁴

The time when Westerners indulged in superficial flirtations with the Orient is now over. Contemporary poetry has endowed the process of globalization with a new meaning because it sets knowledge of the world as a precondition for knowledge of the self. The time-consecrated academic "Orientalism" no longer suffices, for a poetic dialogue requires more than just rational and intellectual activity. The English poet Grevel Lindop had spent years studying Buddhism with Thai and Cambodian monks (residing in England) and developed himself into a practising Buddhist before he decided to embark on a life's work, namely, an *epic poem* entitled "Touching the Earth: A Poem on the life of the Buddha".

¹⁴ Denise Levertov: In Thai Binh (Peace) Province, in: Carolyne Forsche (Edit.): *Against Forgetting*, New York: Norton 1993, p. 331.

[...] We'll use what we can find,
Golddust among the gravel;
transmute the mind
As best we can, offer it to the
Lord,
The lightbringer, the teacher
who restored
The lost path for our age. Give
me your breath
To praise once more that way
past birth and death,
Outside the worlds but starting
from this ground,
A prince's life, a Buddha's, one
who found
Safety, coolness, a lamp, a
jewelled gate,
A garden where the unspoiled
virtues wait,
All is impermanent: that
teaching must
Itself at last lie hidden in the
dust,
Waiting another who will
understand
Its cryptic patterns, drifted with
the sand
Of beings' folly, and clear it
once again
To offer the world a path out of
its pain.¹⁵

The reading which the poet gave on 18 January 1997 at the International Temple in Ubon Ratchathani Province was so convincing in its sincerity and commitment that one was tempted to call the work "confessions of a beautiful soul" (to borrow Goethe's concept from his novel *Wilhelm Meister*). In this way the East-West dialogue paves the way for a quest for "Nirvana".

¹⁵ Grevel Lindop: *Touching the Earth: A Poem on the Life of the Buddha*. Introduction, pp. 45-60. (Quoted from the unpublished manuscript with the kind permission of the author.)

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that we are dealing here with an *imaginary* dialogue. Most of our Thai poets have not mastered foreign languages well enough to be able to appreciate foreign poetry in the original form. Even their English, which they have learnt at school, remains defective. Translations from Western languages are few and far between. Conversely, Thai poetry is unknown in the West as a result of lack of translations. The anthologies that are available are not sufficiently publicized.¹⁶ With regard to the educational background of these Thai poets, the aforementioned meeting between poets and scholars on 13-14 March 1997 turned out to be most revelatory. Most Thai poets come from the provinces and draw from the riches of local culture. Their works derive from oral traditions, quite close to folk songs, and they learn their poetic art from a familial and communal environment. One poetess confessed that she was often scolded by her disciplinarian father, but always *in verse*, whereas another poet related how his grandmother used to sing and recite to him *in verse*, describing her natural environment in a language that was highly metaphorical. If these poets ever enjoy higher education at all, it is mainly at "peripheral" institutions, and rarely at those prestigious metropolitan universities. In other words, they are self-taught and owe more to a rich "informal" rather education than to any

¹⁶ A German scholar, Klaus Wenk, of Hamburg University has done a great deal in the way of translating Thai poetry, both classical and contemporary, but even in German-speaking countries, his anthologies are rarely known. (See: *Studien zur Literatur der Thai*, Bde. 1-2-3-4, Hamburg: Das Seminar für Japanologie der Universität Hamburg, 1982-1989.

formal training. What a difference from their Western colleagues! How many contemporary poets in France and Germany have obtained their doctorates and how many poets in the UK and the USA are at the same time university professors? How did it come about that Thai poets and their Western counterpart could enter into a fruitful, albeit imaginary, dialogue?

The examples from Thai and Western poetry quoted above do possess certain common characteristics that point to a deeper intellectual and spiritual foundation. Are we entitled to speak of a common humanity? But such a concept cannot satisfactorily be explained in scientific terms. I am thus compelled to look for allies in various theoretical schools and the following theoretical digressions represent an attempt to give a provisional answer.

Let us hark back to the 18th century, to the various speculations on the origin of the human language, among which the one by Johann Gottfried Herder probably suits our purpose best, as it is markedly oriented towards poetry.

Poetry is older than prose. For what is language in its beginning other than an imitation of the ringing, moving and awakening nature, a meeting point of elements of poetry? The natural language of all creatures, poeticized from mind into sound, a lexicon of the soul, a constant poetic narration, full of emotion and engagement: that is language at its origin, and is poetry different from that?¹⁷

¹⁷ Quoted in.: Hermann Glaser et al. (Edit.): *Wege der deutschen Literatur: Ein Lesebuch*, Frankfurt/M. u. Berlin: Ullstein 1989, pp. 161-162. (My Translation)

To move on from the poetic origin of the human language to a theory of the commonalities of poetry at the dawn of the new millenium might be too big a leap and certainly scholarly adventurism. Perhaps we can seek help from modern linguistics, such as Noam Chomsky's concepts of "deep structure" and "surface structure", which could throw light on our search for an answer. Moreover, we may be able to explain certain poetic phenomena as "performance" which is based on a common "competence". But experts have warned that such a theory can be applicable only as a broad framework without fine technical subtleties and that a theory of the commonalties of contemporary poetry still requires further serious thinking and investigation.

If scholarly disciplines do not prove to be sufficiently helpful, can we then confide in the poets themselves? The French poet, Stéphane Mallarmé defined the mission of the poet in rather radical terms, namely, "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu", which T.S. Elliot in the footsteps of Mallarmé described as "to purify the dialect of the tribe". When we look at the concept of purification as the common goal of all poetic acts, a question arises as to whether our contemporary poets want to content themselves with just a linguistic purification or whether they wish to extend and amend Mallarmé's concept. We have seen above how Ronald Peacock characterized "regeneration" as one of the virtues of contemporary literature, and in this sense our contemporary poets have mutually responded to the challenge of the age through an implicit act of moral regeneration. Whether we are talking of the wrestling with history by Saksiri Meesomsueb, or the programmatic

demand by Christop Meckel or the internalization of an atrocious war by Denise Levertov, it is undeniable that many of our contemporary poets invariably and willingly engage themselves in a moral-philosophical debate.

If this is our conclusion, are we elevating contemporary poetry to such a dizzy height far removed from everyday life? We must find a middle position somewhere which corresponds to the real situation. Does a possibility exist in the world of today that allows us to think poetically in supranational and global terms and to express ourselves accordingly. Even some of our Thai poets who are still attached to their native soil are fully conscious that they are living in a world in which modern communications and new media cannot be ignored. (One contemporary Thai poet chooses to live at his parental home on an island in the South of Thailand but never hesitates to send his manuscripts by e-mail or telefax.) The French poet Michel Deguy openly pleads for a supranational and global communication in poetic creation.

...One should conceive of a work of art always with a vision that aims beyond those to whom it is initially addressed, surpassing the original group of reference; that is why it is preferable to aim at a "Francophonía" rather than the "French hexagon"; and even "Francophonía" is in turn to be overtaken intentionally, for example, by humanity.¹⁸

¹⁸ Michel Deguy: *Aux heures d'affluence. Poèmes et proses*, Paris: Seuil 1993, S. 32. Deguy is an excellent translator, especially

It is possible that contemporary poets unconsciously think more and more globally. From the level of direct contact with a public within the framework of the oral tradition (including its reconstructed ambience of poetry reading) to the anonymous reading public or that of the internet and the media society, there open up immense possibilities for the poets of today. Michel Deguy has not hesitated to rehabilitate the recently much-maligned word "humanity", but in a new context. The yearning for a dialogue with unknown partners is of paramount importance. This paper aims to demonstrate that a new age has dawned and that poetry possesses an immense potential to bring about a highly meaningful and valuable global dialogue.¹⁹

from German (although he maintains that his spoken German is very poor). As a translator he has tackled the works of Heidegger and Celan. The journal *Po&sie* which he has directed for more than 20 years publishes regularly translations of foreign poetry.

¹⁹ I would like to thank the following colleagues who indefatigably carried the research project to its fruition, namely, : Sumalee Virawongse (Thai poetry), Charturee Tingsabadh (British and Irish poetry), Nitaya Masavisut (American poetry), Achara Wanachaet (French poetry) and Sawitree Tongurai (Assistant to Project Leader and Assistant Researcher in German poetry). Last but not least, my thanks go to the Thailand Research Fund which generously supported the research project. The present paper has been freely translated by the author from the original German version: "Imaginärer Dialog. Die zeitgenössische thailändische Lyrik und ihre westlichen Gesprächspartner", in: *Das Gedicht behauptet sein Recht. Festschrift für Walter Gebhard zum 65. Geburtstag*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2001, pp. 267-276.